A Social Work 'Academic-in-Residence'?

A Social Work 'Academic-in-Residence'?

A Social Work 'academic-in-residence'?

Introduction

The starting point for the idea contained in this paper is two key priorities of public policy relating to university/academic activity. These are firstly, the move to develop universities as 'actors in systems of innovation at national, sectoral and regional levels' (Kitagawa & Lightowler, 2013, p. 2). Secondly, relating to knowledge-exchange policy, an emerging emphasis on the co-creation of knowledge 'by both agents and recipients, where *all* actors and agents are recipients of knowledge' (p. 3, emphasis in original).

This paper discusses ideas in progress that bring together a third sector social welfare agency and a University Social Work team by embedding an academic in the agency. The latter's role would be that of firstly working with practitioners and management to 'upskill' them in academic skills such as writing for publication, researching and making use of research to inform practice and policy. Secondly the academic would facilitate the flow from the field to faculty of practice knowledge, expertise and wisdom together with increased benefits such as greater number of placement opportunities.

'Researcher-in-residence' and 'academic-in-residence' as a means of knowledge exchange

The literature on the history of the development of knowledge sharing between academia and field is now vast (Kitagawa & Lightowler, 2013). A recent paper notes 29 phrases or words used to designate the concept of knowledge transfer and utilisation with terms such as knowledge mobilisation, knowledge translation and knowledge transfer in play (Larrivée, Hamelin-Brabant and Lessard, 2012). Suffice to say that efforts have been in place for decades to devise strategies and systems that bring about a synthesis of academia and practice knowledges.

One particular method has been the idea of 'researcher-in-residence' which consists of the initiation and development of a relationship between researchers and an agency. There are many examples of researcher-in-residence (RiRs) at commercial, educational, welfare and governmental levels, a Google search of the phrase brings up 7,670,000 'hits'. RiR schemes range from those that focus primarily on the agency as a target and/or base for undertaking data collection to other approaches that undertake less in-house research and instead impart

knowledge on a visiting basis. A more refined search using Google Scholar produced 451 'hits', most of which are not relevant because the phrase is only mentioned as part of a job description or in a discussion of research findings and none of the references provide a discussion of the role. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) provide one of the few academic discussions of the role of researcher-in-residence, in the case of their study in a school setting, and suggest that a RiR encompasses the following:

- ''Expert' scientist to share expert scientific knowledge and expertise with staff and pupils;
- 'Trainee' or 'potential' teacher to observe classes and gain a broad understanding of science education;
- 'Role model' to promote science and research, to demystify science and help to overcome stereotypes of scientists;
- 'Classroom resource' to provide assistance in the classroom and during extra-curricular activities'. (Richie and Lewis, 2003, p. 283)

There are much fewer examples of **academic-in-residence** schemes (35,000 in Google and just 80 in Google Scholar, again with no evidence of discussion of the concept and none relating to social work) and in these there is little evidence of difference with researcher-in-residence in so far as the dominant notion is that of unidirectional knowledge flow from academic to practice. For instance, in High School teaching:

> It (the academic-in-residence program) meant that for at least two days in every school term, the academic team visited the school and collaborated with teachers on experimental teaching and learning activities, lectures and workshops for students and staff, and planning meetings. (Semler, 2013, p. 59)

The program's activities also included small scale 'conversations' between teachers and academics plus the academic team convened mini-conferences where teachers discussed 'innovative pedagogical approaches' with each other.

Whether cast as researcher or academic-in-residence, it seems then that the role remains situated within the notion of knowledge transfer **from** academia **to** practice. However, the

wider field of knowledge exchange has moved away from this approach recognising the importance of the **co-production** of knowledge (Wilkinson, Gallagher and Smith, 2012) as indicated by the move from knowledge transfer (from academia to field) to that of knowledge exchange between the two disciplines in a move that aims to dissolve unhelpful and unproductive boundaries between evidence producers and evidence users. Within the knowledge exchange literature, fruitful discussions have developed concerning the concept of learning communities, in which academics and practitioners may come together to co-create research cultures. Here university researchers are cast as critical friends of practice stimulating 'a network of scaffolds and supports' (Brady, 2009, p. 339) and experience of contact with the realities of the field offers academics contemporary insights regarding the exigencies of assessment, intervention and service delivery. Instead of pre-conceived research topics, in such a learning mix, research questions emerge based on practice wisdom and need and the results are thus more likely to be owned by policy-makers and practitioners.

In these discussions the question of **proximity** has come to the fore, that is, the importance of day-to-day contact and interaction between academics and practitioners: 'Research shows that face-to-face contact is the best way to get evidence into the hands of those who need it' (Michaux, 2010, p. 29). UK researchers have articulated a similar notion:

> One of the best predictors of research use is…the extent and strength of linkages between researchers and policy makers or practitioners. Personal contact is crucial, which may be informal and *ad hoc*, through email exchanges or telephone conversations, or else more structured and formal, for example at scheduled meetings or shared workshops…Above all, however, studies suggest that it is face-to-face interactions that are the most likely to encourage policy and practice use of research. (Nutley *et al*., 2007, p. 74)

A recent paper on the researcher-in-residence model schemes synthesises researcher-in-residence models with that of the knowledge-exchange literature, interestingly, for the purposes of this paper there is a twin emphasis on mutual expertise and on being embedded within the practice agency:

> Researchers-in-Residence blur the traditional boundary between their expertise and that of the health service team by becoming an integral part of the team rather than

> external commentators. The important feature of the model is that the Researcher-in-Residence brings a unique expertise to the table, respects the different body of expertise held by the managers and clinicians with whom they are working and is willing to actively negotiate a way of bringing these bodies of expertise together. (Marshall, 2014, p. 3)

As can be seen distinctions between academic-in-residence and researcher-in-residence can be blurred. Academics contribute research knowledge and skills in the exchanges and researchers can bring academic qualities to the table, however researcher-in-residence seems to be the term most in use. However, for the purposes of the project discussed in this paper the term, academic-in-residence has been agreed by the authors and is the chosen term because it encompasses both research **and** other traditional academic skills such as teaching, tutoring and writing for publication.

Social Work and Social Work Education

There is a substantial history of university – field contact in social work, especially relating to practice learning opportunities for students and concerns regarding the relationship between social work teaching and social work practice are regularly voiced. These concerns were reviewed in a series of papers by one of the authors and others in which the literature on the enhancement of student learning was evaluated together with an account of the results of a project involving the placement of academics for a day a week alongside groups of students on field work practice placement (names removed to ensure anonymity). During the latter activity which included many forms of interaction such as individual tutorials, jointly presented seminars and drop-ins, it was established that the relationship of theory and practice remained problematic for many social work students but that, relating to the experiment of encouraging day-to-day proximity of academics and students in a practice context, opportunities for more relaxed (and therefore more successful) integration of learning emerged.

The project showed that better working relationships could be built between academics and students and these surpassed, in terms of 'productivity', those that were achievable within the more formal, less democratic, confines of the University as well as the more experiential setting of a fieldwork agency. The relationships that developed, it was argued, were characterised by 'the scholastic processes of conversation, involvement and engagement as

modes of revealing knowledge' (Gibbs *et al.*, 2004, p. 173; see also Clapton & Forbes, 2009). An additional aspect of the project was the mutually beneficial interactions between academics on site and agency staff, whether on a one-to-one basis or in group and staff meetings, for instance in the updating of knowledge of the current exigencies of service delivery (for academics) and exposure to sources of information regarding possible assessment and intervention alternatives (for social workers).

There is less evidence of such close and extended academia-social work field exchanges and individual contact unrelated to placements (see Alexanderson et al., 2009 for a Swedish example, Wilkinson, Gallagher and Smith, 2012 for a discussion of a UK project and Begun et al., 2010, for a review of various types of university-community collaborations mostly, however, research-driven). The existing literature consistently points to many of the themes outlined above, that is, the importance of day-to-day interactions, the value of close contact, the capitalisation of practitioner expertise, the encouragement of ownership of research by potential users, and, when executed successfully, the ability of the work 'to produce knowledge that is directly relevant to, and hence more meaningful for, practitioners' (Wilkinson, Gallagher and Smith, 2012, p. 319).

Any such exchange projects have connotations of power coming downwards from ivory towers (where there is unrestricted access to on-line journals, opportunities for conference attendance presentations and perceptions of having time to reflect, all not normally available to practitioners in the field). Even the use of phrases such as 'upskill' might suggest the righting of a deficit. Writing about the dynamics of participatory research, Cornwall and Jewkes, observe that 'the key element lies not in the methods but in the attitudes of researchers, which in turn, determine how, by and for whom research is conceptualized and conducted. The key difference lies in the location of power in the various stages of the research process' (1995, p. 1668). It could be added that notions of inferiority amongst the non-academic partners in the research process also need to be challenged, for instance by respect for practitioner-research and the field's unique access to the wealth of user and carer knowledge and insight . The power dynamics in any knowledge exchange require vigilance, most obviously on the side of ensuring that the process is genuinely reciprocal and that practice knowledge and skills are not felt to be somehow secondary to academic knowledge and skills. Finally in this brief discussion of power, what may be viewed as a minor point but one that often emerges as crucial, for instance in relationships between practice teachers and

students, is made by Begun *et al*. (2010) who observe that any differences in learning styles need to be addressed. Above all, mutual trust and respect is deemed central (Gass, 2005).

Whilst there is much to be vigilant about, recent thinking has seen social work agencies articulate their strengths as confident partners:

> Non-profit organisations such as The Benevolent Society have a strong connection to people in their communities and are often in a position to consider community needs as well as strategies for effectively translating research into practice. We are a rich source of case studies and evaluative data about child and family practice. We can also play the role of reminding researchers and policymakers to treat people as participants and partners in processes rather than as objects of concern to 'do things to'. (Michaux, 2010, p. 27)

Michaux goes on to echo the value of proximity noted above: 'Secondments where academics, policymakers and practitioners are embedded in other organisations are powerful ways to create understanding, integration and more insightful leadership' (*ibid*.). By this means academics and practitioners are best sensitized to each other's concerns, joint efforts to develop theory and practice can take place and strategies for service delivery and the schooling of future professionals can be aligned (Bolton and Stolcis, 2003).

Thus the evolving literature on knowledge exchange and learning communities, an example of successful local practice and a growing confidence expressed by the field have formed the theoretical and empirical basis for the ideas outlined in this paper.

So how is a social work academic-in-residence to be operationalised?

A Social Work academic-in-residence: aims and activities

Our project envisages a residency of a day a week for twelve months in a children and families third sector social work agency. The overall aims will be a) to develop a research mindedness amongst practitioners and the agency as a whole, enabling the agency to become a centre for teaching, learning and research excellence; this is in keeping with recent calls for employers to become 'special teaching organisations' (Munro, 2011) and b) to broker and

develop links between the agency and faculty for the benefit of faculty, teaching, students and research endeavours.

The academic-in-residence will:

- shadow practitioners where appropriate and previously agreed by service users;
- work alongside staff in a practitioner research project(s);
- with staff, co-write for publication e.g. submissions to Parliament on policy and practice matters or calls for evidence, web up-dates, blogs, professional magazines and academic journals;
- assist in instituting a series of regular, co-presented, latest research briefings to the staff team;
- seek opportunities for co-presentation (with agency staff) of papers to conferences;
- work with the team, in particular the training and development section, to identify and prioritise other collaborations, Straub et al. (2007) refer to partners agreeing on 'deliverables', i.e. concrete items such as drug-related fact-sheets or resource guides.

Specific developmental activities will include:

- a 'drop-in' series of time slots available for staff to discuss up-to-date relevant children and family knowledge in relation to their casework;
- regular workshops in accessing and synthesising literature, developing presentation skills;
- co-chair of monthly practitioner development fora, the agendas for which to be mutually agreed;
- co-chair of monthly student-practice teacher groups which would look at common themes such as relating theory and practice;
- collaboration with agency training team on staff development strategy;
- work with Management on development of research-informed policy;

- facilitation of contact with the social work training programme at the University with a view to closer collaboration, e.g. advice on course development, student placements and guest lecturing;
- In relation to the University Social Work team, regular report-backs to the team, brokering contacts between faculty members and practitioners and the establishment of more formal partnership arrangements such as agency participation in specific teaching and learning development, e.g. annual course reviews, future planning and joint placement planning.

Concluding observations

This paper has outlined ideas in action and subsequent papers will evaluate the academic-in-residence project but for now it is appreciated that the project outlined constitutes a series of planned activities (and aspirations) and impact is necessarily speculative and only measurable over a period of time (Kitagawa & Lightowler, 2013).

One key issue to emerge already is the cost to the University of having a staff member effectively working somewhere else for a day a week for a year. Whilst funding is being sought to underwrite the project, it is imagined that academic contact relating to on-going commitments such as PhD supervision will be maintained throughout the week but this poses the reservation that the academic-in-residence does not end up working an extra day by 'doubling up', in other words juggling university demands during the day devoted to the practice agency.

A second set of questions that has arisen relates to 'why a day and not half a day a week?'. And, 'why a year and not six months?'. The day per-week proposition is based on the evaluation of the enhancement of the integration of student learning project referred to above and the belief that any less than a day spent embedded in the host agency would defeat the purpose of establishing proximity, the informal contact and face-to-face interactions that are the bedrock for knowledge exchange. A similar response can be made to the proposal of a year's residency rather than six months.

A third question will be ensuring the right 'match' between the agency and the academic requirements of the person to be appointed, e.g. someone skilled in sharing research. Choice will also be informed by existing relationships and a convergence of interests, e.g. child welfare and protection.

Overall, it is suggested that external evaluation will be central to an objective appraisal of the project. This will include feedback from agency staff and supervisors regarding staff engagement in academic-related activities such as increased contact with the University, evidence of practitioner research, literature reviews or writing. The views of students on placement will also be important. As noted, evidence of any overall improvement in service delivery is more difficult to capture however it is suggested that the agency's bi-annual staff development days would provide an opportunity to gather feedback from practitioners concerning any added value to the service. Feedback will also stem from faculty regarding uptake of enhanced opportunities to engage with practitioners e.g. in guest lectures, student placement numbers. Feedback will be gathered using both qualitative (students' experiences, both staff teams' impressions of change) and quantitative (questionnaires, scales) means. The quality of this evaluation will be enhanced if undertaken by an independent researcher.

Finally, because this paper consists of ideas-in-progress, comment from readers about the nature of any knowledge and skills that might be exchanged, advice about evaluation and how greater service user feedback could be obtained, and any other aspect of the project are especially sought.

References

Alexanderson, K., Beijer, E., Bengtsson, S., Hyvönen, U., Karlsson, P-Å. & Nyman, M. (2009). Producing and consuming knowledge in social work practice: research and development activities in a Swedish context. *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice*, 5(2), pp. 127-139.

Begun, A., Berger, L., Otto-Salaj, L. & Rose, S. (2010). Effective Social Work University–Community Research Collaboration. *Social Work*, 55(1), pp. 54-62.

Bolton, M. & Stolcis, G. (2003). Ties That Do Not Bind: Musings on the Specious Relevance of Academic Research. *Public Administration Review*, 63(5), pp. 620-630.

Brady, L. (2009). 'Shakespeare Reloaded': teacher professional development within a collaborative learning community. *Teacher Development*, 13(4), pp. 335-348.

Centre for Social Justice (2014). *Fully Committed?* London: Centre for Social Justice.

Clapton, G. & Forbes, R. (2009). Barefoot Tutors? Navigating the barriers between student, university and field in social work education. *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 9(1), pp. 5-19.

Clapton, G., Cree, V.E., Allan, M., Edwards, R., Forbes, R., Irwin, M., MacGregor, C., Paterson, P., Brodie, I. & Perry, R. (2008). Thinking 'Outside the Box': A New Approach to Integration of Learning for Practice. *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, 27(3), pp. 334-340.

Clapton, G. & Daly, M. (2007). Bridging the Theory - Practice Gap: Student Placement Groups Co-Facilitated by Lecturers and Practice Teachers. *Groupwork*, 17(3), pp. 60-75.

Clapton, G., Cree, V., Allan, M., Edwards, R., Forbes, R., Irwin, M., Paterson, W. & Perry, R. (2006). Grasping The Nettle: Integrating Learning and Practice revisited and re-imagined. *Social Work Education*, 25(6), pp. 645-656.

Cornwall, A. & Jewkes, R. (1995). What is participatory research? *Social Science & Medicine*, 41(12), pp. 1667-1676.

Larrivée, M-C., Hamelin-Brabant, L. & Lessard, G. (2012). Knowledge translation in the field of violence against women and children: An assessment of the state of knowledge. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(12), pp. 2381-2391.

Gass, E. (2005). The path to partnership: A new model for understanding university–community partnerships. *Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education*, 8(2/3), pp. 12-23.

Gibbs, P. (2004). *Trusting in the University*: *The Contribution of Temporality and Trust to a Praxis of Higher Learning.* Dordecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Kitagawa, F. & Lightowler, C. (2013). Knowledge exchange: a comparison of policies, strategies and funding incentives in English and Scottish higher education. *Research Evaluation*, 22(1), pp. 1-14.

Marshall, M. (2014). Bridging the ivory towers and the swampy lowlands; increasing the impact of health services research on quality improvement. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 26(1), pp. 1-5.

McEwan, J. (2007). In the Know. *Research, Policy and Planning*, 25(2/3), pp. 117-128.

Michaux, A. (2010). Integrating knowledge in service delivery-land: a view from The Benevolent Society. In Bammer, G. (Ed.), *Bridging the 'Know–Do' Gap: Knowledge*

brokering to improve child wellbeing (pp. 21-36). Canberra, Australia: Australian National University Press.

Munro E, (2011). *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report: A child-centred system.* London: The Stationery Office.

Nutley, S., Walter, I. & Davies, H. (2007). *Using Evidence: How research can inform public services.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Ritchie, J. & Lewis, J. (2003). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers.* London: Sage.

Semler, L. (2013). *Teaching Shakespeare and Marlowe: Learning Versus the System.* London: Bloomsbury.

Straub, D., Deeds, B., Willard, N., Castor, J., Peralta, L., Francisco, V., Ellen, J. & The Adolescent Trials Network for HIV/Aids Intervention (2007). Partnership selection and formation: A case study of developing adolescent health community–researcher partnerships in fifteen U.S. communities. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 40, pp. 489-498.

Wilkinson, H., Gallagher, M. & Smith, M. (2012). A collaborative approach to defining the usefulness of impact: lessons from a knowledge exchange project involving academics and social work practitioners. *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice*, 8 (3), pp. 311-327.